

Building a Trail, Building Character

by Bill Elgie, Ross MacLean and Rebecca Dykstra

In Grade 9, Upper Canada College (UCC) students participate in a week-long outdoor education program in Halton Region, west of Toronto. This week is the culmination of over 60 days of total outdoor education programming between Senior Kindergarten and Grade 9. Activities during the expedition include moving water canoeing, mountain biking, hiking, orienteering, and rock climbing. To minimize disruption at the school, all 130 students participate at the same time. As a result, the program is too big for UCC to operate on its own, so it is run in partnership with Adventureworks! Associates. The entire grade is divided up into nine groups of 11 to 13 boys per group. Each group is led by a combination of Adventureworks! staff and UCC teachers. The schedule is structured in a circuit, with each group starting and ending at a different location. Every group completes every activity, just in a different order.

One of the main goals of the Grade 9 program is to help deepen students' appreciation and understanding of the green spaces all around us. During this journey, the students are exposed to how much natural beauty there is so close to home. Students get to see Ontario's greenbelt firsthand as they canoe the Credit River in spring flood, climb the sheer limestone cliffs of the Niagara Escarpment at Rattlesnake Point, and hike through the Carolinian forest of southern Ontario along the magnificent Bruce Trail. This trip is unique because it all happens in the shadow of the Greater Toronto Area. Although many of our boys will have gone camping in northern Ontario, very few of them have ever gone on a multi-day outdoor expedition within 30 minutes of Toronto.

Students at UCC are involved in a wide variety of community service projects starting in the primary grades right through to graduation. UCC wants its boys to turn into men of good character. The service program promotes a sense of responsibility, compassion, honour and integrity. We like to say that "UCC is a private school with a public purpose," and our

commitment to service is a reflection of that belief.

As part of this week-long outdoor education adventure, all Grade 9 students spend half a day doing environmental service work for some group or organization operating in the expedition area. These projects help protect and preserve the natural areas of north Halton Region, and the boys are able to give back something to the area they are travelling through. In past years we have partnered with Conservation Halton and Credit Valley Conservation.

An ideal service project for nearly 120 Grade 9 boys is both hands-on and significant. The students need to be actively engaged and feel that what they are doing is not a make-work project. A large-scale project that has all students working together on one task contributes to the students' sense of community and has the potential of being "cool."

Because the students hike on the Bruce Trail, we have wanted to work with the Bruce Trail Club for many years. Until last year, we had never been able to find an ideal project that coincided with the timing of our Grade 9 program, which is late April. That all changed last fall when Dr. Kathy Haras from Adventureworks! got in touch with Ross McLean from the Caledon Hills Bruce Trail Club (BTC). The Caledon Hills BTC needed help to rehabilitate the section of the Bruce Trail that runs along the Cheltenham Badlands. We had help to give in the form of 140 eager students and staff. It was a match made in heaven!

The Bruce Trail is a public footpath along the Niagara Escarpment, running from Queenston to Tobermory at the tip of the Bruce Peninsula. It was conceived and is currently maintained and developed by volunteers, people who give of their time and energy simply because of their love of the land.

The Badlands area in southern Ontario is composed of soft Queenston shale, and as

such is subject to erosion. Within close proximity of a huge urban population, it was being "loved to death" and the trail was becoming badly impacted. For a volunteer group to undertake major trail rehabilitation would require a lot of resources, both human and financial.

The Caledon Hills BTC quickly accepted UCC's offer of 120 students who would work in teams of 12 or 13 for a half day. The design and planning process began with some of the Caledon Hills BTC's most experienced trail designers (all volunteers) spending days studying the land and pricing materials. Even with some in-kind donations, the cost of the project came close to \$9,000 and all funds had to be raised by the club without any help from government sources.

The plan involved installing landscape fabric, pinning in cedar logs with angle irons, and carrying in sand and gravel by wheelbarrow along the entire route of about a kilometre. This involved 400 cedar logs, 700 angle irons and truckloads of aggregate. The goal of this project was to restore one of the most highly used sections of the Bruce Trail in order to allow it to remain open to the public.

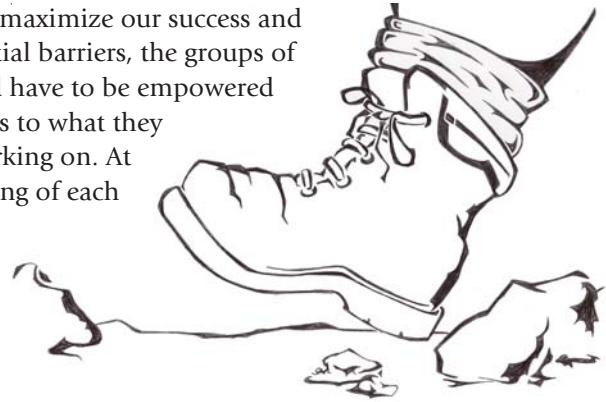
In the week before the students arrived, volunteers from the club laid out the project and installed the cedar logs; for safety reasons we did not want the students using sledge hammers.

Before students could commence their part of restoring the trail, a number of obstacles needed to be addressed. Developing a sense of ownership in the students with regards to the magnitude of what they were undertaking, as well as the unusual combination of Bruce Trail volunteers, many of whom were retired, and 14-year-old boys created complexities that could not be overlooked. The volunteers had already invested much into this endeavour and had a strong desire to see the trail completed within the week. Most of the boys would not see the trail completed during their half day at the Badlands and were not initially motivated to undertake three hours of physical labour.

In order to maximize our success and combat initial barriers, the groups of boys would have to be empowered with regards to what they were embarking on. At the beginning of each half day session Bruce Trail volunteers greeted the group of students and UCC and Adventureworks! staff and gave them a brief tour and lesson regarding the use of the trail. While this was logistically important, it played an even larger role in preparing the group to take ownership over their work. The groups learned that the Badlands are one of the most used sections of the Bruce Trail, and were given a geography lesson of the area explaining the susceptibility of the soil to erosion. The briefing also consisted of showing the group what they would be doing to prevent the trail from being closed, and informing them that they were a crucial part of a 50-year solution.

The knowledge that what they were doing was going to be leaving such a grand impression really helped to motivate the students. Another motivating factor was seeing the spectacular Badlands. During the week each of the groups hiked on numerous sections of the Bruce Trail. This, in combination with incredible sight of the Badlands, helped many of the students gain a sense of the importance of what they were doing.

An additional factor that led to the success of the week was stressing the importance of group work to the students. The majority of the work done on this section of the Bruce Trail involved strenuous activity for a number of hours. It was imperative for the students to work together to achieve their goals. Each group had their own ideas regarding how to maximize their group's potential: some boys raced one another down the trails, some decided to move the wheelbarrows in teams,



and others switched roles often. Regardless of what method they chose, each group of boys soon discovered that when they worked as a team they could achieve so much more, and be much less tired at the end of a hard day, than working individually. Although the student groups obviously varied in quality, most responded with an enthusiasm that over the week was contagious.

The week on the Cheltenham Badlands was a grand success. The students learned that working together was imperative in accomplishing the project, and after taking ownership of this project, working together became nearly second nature. Without the sense of ownership instilled in each participant, attaining our goals would have been problematic. All those involved in the restoration of the trail got to be part of a wonderful project that will allow the trail to be enjoyed for many years to come.

In the end, the combination of Bruce Trail Club volunteers and UCC students proved highly effective. Bill Elgie, Director of the Outdoor School of UCC, e-mailed Caledon Hills BTC Trail Coordinator, Ross Maclean, with the following message: "I have had the pleasure of doing service work with many organizations over the years, and the project last year was one of the finest I have seen. You were well-organized, you brought out large numbers of volunteers and your enthusiasm was highly contagious. At the end of the week-long program, many students picked their half day of service work with you and your team of volunteers as their highlight of the trip. I hope we can work with you again soon."

Almost immediately after completion, outside accolades began to pour in for the largest single trail rehabilitation project in the history of the Bruce Trail. Paula Terpstra is the Natural Heritage Coordinator for Ontario Heritage Trust (OHT), the group that holds title to the Badlands. She wrote: "I was very impressed by the excellent footpath that now exists. It clearly involved a substantial commitment of

volunteer labour and materials. I'd like to extend congratulations for a job well done, both on behalf of the OHT and myself personally."

The highest award for such work within the Bruce Trail Association is the Philip and Jean Gosling Award. More than 40 years ago, Philip was one of the founders of the trail and its first Trail Director. He was a naturalist and wanted the Escarpment celebrated for its natural beauty. About five years ago he donated an award to be given annually for the greatest contribution to the trail from an environmental perspective. The thinking was that we "must walk lightly on the land." Trail improvements that helped to protect the ecology of the escarpment were thus to be recognized.

At this year's BTA Annual General Meeting, the Caledon Hills Club was the unanimous choice of the judges to receive this award, in recognition of the major rehabilitation of the trail through the Badlands property. Chris Walker, the chair of the Awards Committee, wrote: "Congratulations . . . [on] the excellent work in treadway restoration at the Badlands. . . . A tremendous amount of planning, expertise and volunteer hours went into the completion of this major treadway upgrade."

These congratulations were extended to everyone who had worked on the trail — adult volunteers and UCC students. It was hard work but we had created a footpath that will stand up well to the thousands who each year walk on this magnificent landscape. The students took pride in their achievement and grew in their knowledge of the landscape and the importance of contributing to their community.

Bill Elgie is the Director of Upper Canada College's Norval Outdoor School. Ross MacLean is the Trail Coordinator for the Caledon Hills Bruce Trail Club. Rebecca Dykstra had the privilege of spending five days on the Bruce Trail working in combination with the Bruce Trail Association, Upper Canada College and Adventureworks! Associates as the service project coordinator.